

Education

Performance Testing

Tennessee's testing program is considered one of the most extensive in the country, according to Education Week, which released a rating of state education accountability efforts in January 1999.

Tennessee high school seniors are required to take an exit exam, choosing from the standardized ACT, SAT, or Work Keys tests before graduating. The ACT and SAT are college placement tests. Work Keys measures workplace skills. Seventy-seven percent of the state's graduates take the ACT test. Most of the students taking the SAT test performed in the top 10 percent of their classes and outscored the national average by 31 points on the verbal and 14 points on the mathematics section.

In addition to the exit exams, students' educational progress is monitored through a number of tests. The Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) test evaluates students in grades three through eight in reading, language, mathematics, science, and social studies. The Tennessee Writing Assessment is made of students in the fourth, seventh, eighth, and 11th grades.

Tennessee attempts to monitor school and school system effects on student performance through the value-added assessment system, which compares scores in reading, language arts, and science. Beginning in 1995-96, high school math subjects were added to the value-added testing.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. The federal government also assesses educational performance through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a Congressionally mandated program. This assessment found that the state's fourth graders' average 1996 math scores (219) were not significantly different from the national average (222) and had improved from 1992 scores. However, the scores of eighth graders were below the national average but had increased more than the national scores. The science scores of Tennessee eighth graders (143) ranked below the national average (148); however, Tennessee's life science scores did not differ significantly from national averages.

While the attendance rate for secondary schools in Tennessee has remained at 92 percent since 1991-92, 43 percent of eighth graders surveyed in 1996 by the NAEP said absenteeism was a moderate to serious problem in their schools.

The NAEP assessment included a look at community issues affecting education. School principals were questioned about parental involvement in their schools. Ninety-four percent of eighth graders attended schools at which the principals reported parental support as very positive or somewhat positive. More than one-third of Tennessee students said they discussed schoolwork at home every day, and another 30 percent said they did so several times a week. Forty-three percent of students said they had not changed schools except for promotions to a higher grade, and 20 percent of students had moved only once.